

Book of Mass Prayers Vanished Post 7/26/67

Catholic Church Missal, Not Bible, Used by Johnson for Oath at Dallas

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When Lyndon B. Johnson took the oath of office as the 36th President of the United States, his hand was resting not on a Bible but on a missal — the Roman Catholic book containing Mass prayers.

The missal was still wrapped in cellophane and resting in a cardboard box when it was found for the swearing-in ceremony aboard Air Force One after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

A former Kennedy aide be-

lieves the missal used in the ceremony had been presented to the late President shortly before he arrived in Dallas during the visit to Texas. Its present whereabouts are unknown.

An account of how a Protestant President came to take the oath of office on a Catholic prayer book appears in "The Truth About the Assassination," a book by Charles Roberts, to be published next month by Grosset & Dunlop. Roberts, White House correspondent for Newsweek magazine, was one of two "pool" reporters who returned to Washington aboard the

White House jet after having witnessed the swearing in.

The Washington Post independently confirmed the use of the missal through an inquiry that began several weeks before it received Roberts' manuscript.

Presidential press secretary George Christian said the White House would issue no comment on these findings. It was known, however, that Mr. Johnson and Federal Judge Sarah Hughes, who administered the 36-word oath, both believed that the small, leather-bound book was a Bible.

Mr. Johnson's employment of

See MISSAL, A8, Col. 3

Missal Used by Johnson for Oath

a missal in no way affects the legality of the presidential term that he served until he was elected President and took the same oath again — with a family Bible — before the Capitol on Jan. 20, 1965.

Neither the Constitution nor any Federal law calls for the use of a Bible in the taking of Federal oaths of office.

For varying reasons, three other Chief Executives — Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge — failed to employ the Holy Book in presidential oath-taking ceremonies.

Silence and Evasion

A network of silence, evasion and misstatement arose around the secret use of a missal in the tragic circumstances that marked Mr. Johnson's sudden assumption of the Presidency.

This led William Manchester to write incorrectly in a serialized version of "The Death of a President" that "President Kennedy always carried his personal Bible" in the bedroom cabin of Air Force One and that "on flights alone, the President had read it evenings before snapping off the night light."

Manchester went on to relate in Look magazine how the "Bible" used in the ceremony "remains untraced." Thus, he erroneously con-

cludes that "the last item of Kennedy memorabilia to be left in Dallas, his most cherished personal possession, was his Bible."

A different account from Manchester's, obtained by Roberts and by The Washington Post, has been confirmed by several authoritative sources.

O'Brien Brings Missal

The Johnson staff assumed that Judge Hughes would take a Bible with her to the White House plane, then parked at Love Field in Dallas. She did not.

Judge Hughes boarded the plane at exactly 2:30 p.m. (CST). By then, it was too late for her to go back and return with a Bible, as she offered to do. Furthermore, Secret Service agents, for security reasons, were against permitting her to leave and were eager to depart for Washington as soon as possible.

It was in these circumstances that Lawrence F. O'Brien came in from the bedroom compartment, aft. of the conference room, carrying the missal. O'Brien, former chief of the White House congressional liaison staff, is now Postmaster General in the Johnson Cabinet.

Except for Mrs. John F. Kennedy, the party aboard the plane was already assembled for the oath-taking when O'Brien entered the room. He handed the missal to Judge

Hughes, who looked at it briefly and took the book to be a Douay (Roman Catholic) Bible. Then Mrs. Kennedy entered the compartment for the short swearing-in ceremony, which took place at 2:38.

Some months later, Malcolm Kilduff, then an associate White House press secretary, was asked to locate the "Bible." Kilduff, one of the 27 persons in the compartment during the oath-taking, had held a tape-recorder microphone for Judge Hughes and the new President.

After Kilduff's preliminary inquiries proved unsuccessful, he telephoned Judge Hughes in Dallas. She told him she handed it to "someone . . . I thought he was a security man" before she left the plane and described him to Kilduff as "a tall, dark-haired man."

The missal has never been seen since.



Photo by Cecil Stoughton

Judge Hughes holds missal at Johnson swearing-in aboard the Air Force One.